

1. Numbers 1:1-46

In our Bibles the fourth book of the Pentateuch is called Numbers. It is at the same time the fourth book of the Old Testament which is based on the Pentateuch and continues to build on it. The name is derived from the Latin name Numeri which was taken from the Latin translation, the Vulgate. The Vulgate, in turn, took the heading from the Greek Bible, the Septuagint, where the book was named Arithmoi: Numbers. However, to go back to the Hebrew for this translation is impossible. The Jews named the book Bemidbar, which is: In the wilderness.

In this first outline I wish to keep both headings in mind. In the first place: Numbers. Or rather: countings, enumerations. Plural! For there is more than one enumeration in this book. Twice all the people, except one tribe, are enumerated. Then a separate enumeration of that one tribe, Levi, takes place. And between those two enumerations of the people lies a period of thirty-eight years. So much happens in that time (the wanderings in the desert), that at the end of that time there is every reason for a second enumeration. In retrospect, that is also the reason for the enumeration at the beginning. How else can comparisons be made after these thirty-eight years? For which reason the LORD, who foresees all things and provides for all things, commands the first enumeration. The people will remain in the wilderness for thirty-eight years. This prolonged sojourn will cost human lives. So many will die that it amounts to the death of one nation and at the same time a young and new nation arises. This nation is allowed to enter into the promised rest. For this reason I consider the book to be most clearly characterised by a combination of both titles - Numbers and Bemidbar: Enumerations in the wilderness.

In the first place I want to draw attention to the fact that the LORD commands this enumeration. He is behind it. I emphasise this because the Holy Scriptures also speak of enumerations which did not have God's approval. Who does not recall the one in 2 Samuel 24? This does not mean that taking a census as such is wrong. Only recently YAHWEH had already given regulations regarding it. I refer to Exodus 30:11-16: *"...When you take the census of the children of Israel for their number, then every man shall give a ransom for himself to the LORD, when you number them, that there may be no plague among them when you number them...."*

Enumerations therefore are not wrong in themselves. But they are dangerous, although the danger for Israel differs from the superstitious fear of enumerations felt by the heathen people of those days. We know of these fears thanks to excavations in ancient Babylon, especially in the city of Mari. There, people believed that the recording of names in an enumeration evoked dangers; that the persons whose names were recorded were thereby exposed to evil spirits or destructive powers, which could harm them via their names. But that is the *heathen* view. In *Israel* the people are free from superstitious fear, because everything rests in the faithfulness of God's covenant.

This does not nullify the fact that taking a census can be dangerous also in covenant circles. One comes into contact with God, the Living One, the Holy One, the Righteous One. He demands that the lives of those who are counted are totally dedicated to Him. A dedication which cannot be accomplished by a sinful and mortal human being. The LORD does not retract His demand, but He mercifully opens the way for a substitute, a replacement. The enumerated must give a ransom for their lives' sake. Half a shekel is YAHWEH's levy for everyone who will be counted. For this reason the twentieth birthday becomes a critical day for every Israelite youth.

The census, prepared in Exodus 30, becomes reality not long afterwards (the book of Leviticus describes a period of only one month). It becomes reality, not because *Moses* decides that the time has come, but because "*the LORD spoke to Moses in the Wilderness of Sinai, in the tabernacle of meeting*" on that first day of the second month. Moses does not take self-willed initiatives; he is an intermediary. He is not God, but he is mediator of the Old Testament, and that always for the sake of Christ's merits. Now the count can be carried out in trust, and the outcome can be faced with confidence.

A second point for consideration is the way this enumeration is conducted. Regardless of the actual size of the nation, the counting of such a large number of people is a very big undertaking. Here I already briefly touch upon the difficulty of the exact final figure; which is to say, in the sense that I use the term "exact". In the first place regarding those who are counted. But also regarding the people as a whole, including those who are not counted: women and children, girls and boys below the age of twenty. We can ask if they are a negligible factor in the enumeration of the

whole congregation. Must we conclude that they are not at all important? That I can not imagine in a book which also defends the rights of the woman (the daughters of Zelophehad). Moreover, is there then not too much emphasis on the male part of the population which is able to bear arms? Is Israel during its journey through the wilderness above all an army? Do they, because they only are counted, not appear here as representatives of the entire nation?

At this moment I do not wish to draw a conclusion regarding the actual significance of the final total. But I do wish to point out that in vs 2 YAHWEH says: "*Take a census of all the congregation of the children of Israel.*" The sum, which is literally: the total, the entire number.

Does this mean that the whole congregation lined up: men, women and children? That is hard to imagine. With respect to the last two categories, there can be many circumstances, many practical problems, which force them to stay at home. Yet it says: all the congregation. The absentees are represented in the male members who are obligated to attend.

It is therefore not a muster, nor an inspection, but only an enumeration of those that can be enrolled in military service. The guidelines for this enumeration differ from those used today for an inspection for military service. It is impossible to make a comparison here. Israel is *unique* in its composition according to tribes, clans and families. In this way, and in no other way, God wants to have them grouped and counted. In this manner they appear in the line of descent, according to the blood and the seed of the respective tribal fathers and patriarchs; the line sanctified by God. Above all, in this manner, they appear in the line of God, who had established His covenant with the first patriarch and his seed after him in their generations. Israel is not an agglomeration of individuals, who have little connection with each other (as is the case in modern society). They do not receive a call-up for military service, accompanied by a medical examination. They are not tested concerning their suitability for a certain branch of the armed forces. Here we meet Israel, a unity, the seed of one father; branches of the same tree. The entire Old Testament law, including this command, has been attuned to that. The word "names" here indicates what I would call individual persons. They line themselves up in family groups (a number of closely related families). As family groups, or "houses of the fathers", with still others,

they belong to one clan. Finally, with other clans they represent a certain tribe.

So only the males of twenty years and older appear before Moses. In other words, all those who march in the army; or rather, who *could* march. It does not say here: those who are marching as an army. Numbers 1 does not amount to a review of soldiers, an inspection of troops; there is no military display here. Even though Israel's army *is* ready for defense in case an emergency arises. The most important fact is that they are being counted. When they have lined themselves up for that purpose, the enumeration can begin.

Who are responsible for this? Vs 1 says, "*The LORD spoke to Moses.*" However, the verb at the beginning of vs 2 ("*Take*"), which tells him what to do, is plural. This command is meant for two elderly persons: Moses and Aaron. Probably then, for that reason YAHWEH instructs them to appoint a man out of every tribe to assist them, namely the man who is the head of his father's house. Vs 16 calls them leaders of their tribes. What does this assistance amount to? Do they help in counting, in writing or in verifying? Or are there perhaps still others in subordinate positions who assist in these things? I do not know. A lot depends on the *extent* of the work.

And that is the third point with which Numbers 1 confronts us. The point also which has caused the greatest amount of discussion. Namely, how should we regard the final sum, the total, referred to by YAHWEH in vs 2 and revealed by Him in vs 46? How should we interpret the final figure?

The easiest way is, of course, to simply take it as it stands. For instance, we read: "*Those who were numbered of the tribe of Reuben were 46,500.*" Does that imply that we immediately interpret it literally, namely that this tribe consisted of forty-six thousand five hundred "male members" of twenty years and older, which is the simplest, or rather the easiest way. In this way one is quickly finished with the Bible. I do not mean to imply that anyone who reads his Bible in this way is always wrong. In fact, in this chapter he *MAY* be right! However, to quote an expression from Dr. H Collin, he would still "be right too soon". Too soon, because he would have failed to consider seriously the problems involved.

For indeed there are problems here. To prevent misunderstandings I want to remark first of all that these problems have nothing

to do with Bible criticism. I realise that Bible critics have presented these figures, together with many other things in the Pentateuch, as proof for their opinion that this could not possibly have been the work of Moses, or of one of his contemporaries. The numerical material of Numbers 1 and 26 then proves that this is the work of the post-exile generation, who delighted in such reconstructions. I wish to distance myself most emphatically from such opinions.

I believe Moses to be the author of the Pentateuch. In its entirety it is a product of his time. It is not, either in total or in part, a fable or a reconstruction from a later century. For *that specific reason*, however, the question becomes the more urgent: was this nation, which came out of Egypt and travelled through the wilderness, already so numerous and large at this time? Note well: all the women and the girls and the boys under twenty must still be added to the 603,550.

In this context the following questions arise: was it possible that fourteen men could carry out all this work *in just one day*? After receiving God's instructions (verses 1-16) all those 603,550 people had to be notified. They then had to suspend whatever they were doing, come to the gathering place and line up in orderly fashion. And finally - using the means of those days - all had to be counted and recorded.

Apart from that, what a total! What a nation, what a sea of people had been travelling from Egypt and through the wilderness. Men, women and children, not to mention the mixed multitude that accompanied them (Exodus 12:38); and added to that, all their cattle.

The most important question is not how this nation of two to three million received food, drink and guidance throughout this time. Their Guide was the God of miracles. I only mention the manna, the water from the rock, and Deuteronomy 8:4 - "*Your garments did not wear out on you, nor did your foot swell these forty years.*" What is impossible with men is possible with GOD. Which does not mean that everything that is possible always becomes actual fact. Our God does not always do what He is *able* to do. As the Gospel writer tells us, sometimes the Lord Jesus did not do any miracles in a certain place because of the unbelief of the people. That same JESUS CHRIST goes before His people here, in the wilderness. Scripture teaches that in the NT, for instance in 1 Corinthians 10.

But how large was the nation which He guided? A few million, some 600,000, or perhaps 33,000?

Scripture also provides indications that we should take a smaller, rather than a larger estimate. Aside from the question whether Israel in two hundred and fifteen years could have grown from seventy souls to a nation of three million, I wish to mention Exodus 23:30, where the LORD says, in connection with the occupation of Canaan: *“Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased, and you inherit the land.”* This would have been no problem for a nation of a few million people. I also mention Deuteronomy 7:7: *“The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples.”* I can not assume that the LORD exaggerates here to keep Israel low and humble. When the LORD makes a comparison, we can inquire after the size of other nations and the number of the inhabitants of other countries in those days. On the basis of archaeological data we know that the cities of that time were small and the troops operating in Palestine were not numerous.

Competent scholars have estimated that the number of the inhabitants of Canaan at the time of the entry under Joshua was around 250,000. As Prof. B Holwerda wrote, if there were a few million Israelites, they would simply have overrun the Canaanites. The Bible tells us so clearly that not Israel itself, but YAHWEH conquered Canaan for them. The small size of Israel shows His miraculous power the more strongly. Above all, we have to see that the LORD works His great acts in the framework of a specific time. Sure, there must be a place for Israel. But the proportions of THAT time must be observed. In that way the events of the book of Joshua become more understandable: the fall of Jericho, the defeat at Ai, the battle at Gibeon, etc.

But how can this be reconciled with the information from Numbers 1, a chapter which gives figures: so many thousands and so many hundreds in every tribe. We are always impressed by figures, immediately adding them together, arriving at that result in chapter 1:46 as we understand it. We treat those numbers in the same way as we deal with the figures and numbers we encounter today. But the whole question is: CAN that be done here? Someone will ask: “But what then must be done with the information given here?” Consider the following: wherever one hundred is written or recorded, it actually means: one hundred. However the word

which is translated by 1,000 has also other, more ancient, meanings. The word in question - èlef - originally meant: cow or ox. After that: cattle, herd of cows or herd of oxen. Then: a group of people possessing and tending such a herd; or who lived together like such a herd. The word èlef therefore gradually acquired the meaning of "group", a fairly small group of members of one family, or the small army division which it could bring into the field during the war. Only after that did èlef, which originally had a very indefinite meaning as a numeral, come to mean: 1,000. Israel was predominantly organised according to *families* and went to war *accordingly*. Briefly, èlef first of all must be regarded as referring to the group, and after that to the persons who made up the group, or the men who represented it.

Can this be maintained in the text as we find it in chapter 1? Prof. B Holwerda, whom I follow here, remarks that the totals are rounded off. Numbers 1 gives a rounded figure for each tribe. Counting was done according to clans. "This is how I imagine the situation: the tribes lined up separately. Each tribe grouped itself according to the main branches. Within that framework the families who lived together, the alafim, set themselves in array. From these the individuals who could serve in the army were counted. The enumeration showed therefore: the tribe of Reuben: so many alafim with so many men, etc. The final result of the completed enumeration is: 598 alafim and five alafim+550. Here the two meanings of èlef (family group and a thousand, HMO) were used side by side. This became mixed up, the 5 was added to the 598 and the result was 603. If our assumption is correct, the whole army of Israel consisted of 5,550 men, say 55 battalions, out of 598 alafim or family groups. Here the actual numerical value of èlef is substantially lower than that of me'a, (which is a hundred), since an èlef averages 10 soldiers."

It is unquestionable that according to this view several things in the Scriptures become more understandable. The defeat at Ai, where thirty-six men fell, does not mean a loss of 1% (36 out of 3,000) for Israel, but of almost all the soldiers who had been sent out. The information of Judges 18, that the tribe of Dan had six hundred warriors, fits in better with 400 out of 64 alafim than with a figure of 64,000 men. The colossal number of casualties in the war with Benjamin (Judges 20) can also be explained more easily in this manner. Moreover, in this way at least the problem is clarified regarding *the ratio* between the number of the first-

born and the total number of able bodied men. There are 22,273 firstborn in the eleven tribes, which we count individually since they have to be redeemed. This compares with 603,550 able bodied men, to which we still have to add the boys from a month to twenty years old. The conclusion is that the average Israelite family had at least thirty children. "But," someone may remark, "if we try to solve it the other way, do we not face a much greater problem, even an impossibility? Then the ratio becomes 22,000 firstborn over against 5,550 warriors plus an unknown number of minors, which together would not be much more than 10,000." That we are dealing with individuals here is apparent from the fact that they are put over against the same number of Levites, whose total they exceed by two hundred and seventy-three persons. We face a difficult point here which we may not avoid. I will discuss it in connection with Numbers 3 and 4, in order not to make this outline too lengthy.

I will bypass the other solutions concerning this problem. But I do wish to mention that Prof. AH Edelkoort offers quite an attractive solution in his explanation of Numbers in the series *Tekst en Uitleg*. The figure 600,000 then refers to the entire nation, the total number of souls who are REPRESENTED here by their married men and adult sons. Numbers 11:21 could point in this direction. He does admit, however, that in this way the number 603,550, an exact figure, is not explained satisfactorily.

Questions

- 1 What is the connection between the name (names) of the book of Numbers and the title of this series of outlines?
- 2 Is it right to hold a census?
Is a census commanded (in the law, or by a direct command)?
Which dangers are connected with a census? And what do some nations mistakenly consider to be the risks of a census?
- 3 Where does Genesis indicate that the nation (Abraham's seed) can not be numbered?
- 4 Compare the two accounts of the censuses in 2 Samuel 24 and 1 Chronicles 21. Which significant difference(s) can be noticed?
- 5 Where do 1 Kings and 2 Chronicles refer to the fact that Abraham's seed "cannot be numbered"? In which period of time was that?

- 6 Which people are counted in Numbers? Which further qualification is given in Numbers 1:3? With what, in our time, can the census not be compared?
- 7 Do we conclude that the people who are not counted in Numbers 1, are excluded? Can we say that they are really not important? Or are they represented by their husbands and sons at the enumeration?
- 8 Usually, the Hebrew word “èlef” is translated by the number “1000”. How did it come about that the word assumed another meaning, like “unity, clan, group”? Is that change far-fetched, or was this the original meaning? Or was it derived from an even earlier meaning? How then did it change into our well-known number 1000? (Remember that in Hebrew most numerals were not used as adjectives, but as nouns. While we say: “Three men”, in Hebrew it would say: “A triple, namely of men”.)
- 9 Provide Scriptural references (Joshua, Judges) which support the translation of “èlef” as “group”.